SWAMI RAMANAND TEERTH MARATHWADA UNINVERSITY, NANDED

# A STUDY OF THE BRITISH WOMEN POETS OF ROMANTICISM: EXTENDING THE CANON.

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**INTRODUCTION**:

Romanticism remains one of the most influential periods in the literary history which has been studied for several years as a major literary phase by numerous critics and scholars. Just to mention some of them are Lillian Furst, A. O. Lovejoy, Rene Wellek and others. Lillian Furst's "*Romanticism: Critical Idiom series*" remains a classic statement of Romanticism. A. O. Lovejoy's celebrated paper "*On the Discrimination of Romanticisms*" stresses plurality of the implication of the term 'Romanticism'. His basic contention is that the word Romantic means so many things that, by itself it means nothing. It has ceased to perform the function of a verbal sign. He expected that one should begin to talk Romanticism in plural. His contention made a thorough examination of the concept of Romanticism necessary. The challenge of Lovejoy was not met till Rene Wellek's article in "*Comparative Literature*" which he republished in his "*Concept of Criticism*" along with a postscript. He strongly defended the term and deprecated what Lovejoy had written in the essay by asserting that the major Romantic movement form a unity of theories, philosophies and style and that these, in turn, form a coherent group of ideas each of which implicates the other. He illustrated this with examples drawn from not only English but continental literature also. The Romantic Era is one of the great ages of English poetry with Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron and Shelley all publishing around 1800. Unlike earlier writers the Romantics do not turn to God as the source of order, nor is order sought in society. What the Romantics seek is to find harmony in life which is at one pattern that can be found in the natural world. At the same time there is great emphasis on imagination: the source of order becomes internal, as in the work of Wordsworth, where there is stress on how his mind interacts with what he sees in the natural world, so that some pattern and harmony is created in

life. Wordsworth is aware, however, that this vision is a rare thing that it might be illusory, and that life for the most part is disordered, puzzling and fragmented.

A major change in thinking occurred in the late eighteenth century. A new feeling came into existence, a sense that people had become separated from Nature. This is most evident in the publication in 1798 "*Lyrical Ballads*" by Wordsworth and Coleridge, which provides the effective starting point for Romantic poetry. The Romantic poets repeatedly turn to Nature, finding a truth and value which had been lost sight of by rational philosophers. Romantic poets also attribute a tremendous importance to childhood, feeling that the child possesses innocence, wisdom which disappears as maturity approaches. This emphasis on what is natural and uncorrupted leads to a new emphasis on the importance of feelings and emotions. Such thinking finds expression in an extraordinary flood of great poetry from Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron and Shelley. Their work is very popular, but it is common failing to underestimate the poetic sophistication of these writers. It is often assumed that a Romantic poet has a positive philosophy centering on simple, natural values, but for most part, the major poets are very hesitant Romantics, fully aware that there can be no simple scheme of values.

This is a stereotypical account of Romanticism which in many senses sounds incomplete and partial. Jennifer Breen, for instance, asserts, "The history of Romanticism has frequently been dominated by an assumption that a small group of poets is representative of forty diverse years of literary creativity. 'The Romantic Canon' of works that have chosen for serious reading and study: William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, Lord Byron, P. B. Shelley and John Keats. Sometimes earlier poets, such as William Blake and Robert Burns, have been included. Only occasionally the undergraduate canon been stretched to

include an essayist such as William Hazlitt or a novelist such as Mary Shelley with her work of science fiction, *Frankenstein*"

Thus not only five poets form British Romanticism but also another aspect of reality and its representation comes in the form of contemporary women poets like Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Jonna Baillie, Mrs. Felicia Brown Hemans and Leticia Elizabeth Landon. Thanks to the efforts of feminists that one of the activities on feminist agenda is to unearth the writing of women poets and now that the writings of these women poets are also worthwhile, in the light of these works it appears that our conventional view of Romanticism has to be altered considerably.

Wordsworth and Coleridge immediately followed the upsurges of freedom in the American War of Independence and the French Revolution, and the increased social consciousness aroused by the Industrial Revolution. Tiring of the restrictive rules imposed by the neo-classical style of writing, the Romantic poets felt free to give play to their imagination and individualism, and to concern themselves in their writings with the humanitarian objects and with nature. There was, too, revival of interest in the stories and legends of the Middle Ages, and in classical mythology, with the picturesque and romantic tales these afford.

As a pioneer of the Romantic Movement, Wordsworth is pre-eminent. He introduced into his poetry natural every day speech, and made poetry popular. The other poets principally connected with the Romantic ideal were Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats. It would be fair to say that Wordsworth revived lofty ideals, Byron brought back a touch of glamour, Shelley again breathed music into poetry and Keats re-kindled the fires of beauty. All in their way brought back to poetry

the spirit it had breathed in the great Elizabethan age, to make the age in which they lived a true Romantic Revival.

The women poets of Romantic era exhibit the same characteristics, such as theme, forms, Gothic elements, imagery, diction that are common to the poetry of male poets of the era. Stuart Curran in his article, *'The I Altered'* makes a case of placing the male and female poets of Romantic era together in formal and thematic dialogue without privileging either. As an instance of the same, **I would like to explore the possibility of extending the Romantic canon and forming a Romantic fraternity on the basis of following points: Theme, Form, Imagery, Diction, Oriental elements.**

**THEME**: Smith's Nightingale is a sonnet but it has striking thematic similarity with Keats' Nightingale. Her nightingale like that of Keats' sings a melodious song. In both poems nightingale becomes an object that makes both the speakers contemplate about their personal sorrow. Smith merely echoes Keats when she says:

> Ah! Songstress sad! Such my lot might be
>
> To sigh and sing at liberty- like thee!

Letitia Elizabeth Landon's *The Proud Ladye* has similarity of theme and atmosphere with Keats' *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. Her Proud Ladye is heartless like that of Keats' fairy; like her Lady Adeline has ruined numerous youths who met tragic end but her Hero, Knight unlike Keats' is resolute and undefeated.

Felicia Brown Hemans' *The Rainbow* reminds one of Wordsworth's *My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold Rainbow*, although her rainbow is more religious and Wordsworth's secular. Her Skylark like Shelley's skylark is in flight and can

be heard singing a joyous song. In both poems the bird flies in the golden sunlight. But Hemans' skylark finally achieves the status of a divine object that makes the speaker turn inward and praises its creator.

Childhood is a favourite theme in Romantic poetry especially in Blake and Wordsworth. It also fascinates Joanna Baillie's *To A Child*. She merely echoes Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode* when she says:

> And thou must laugh and wrestle too,
>
> A mimick warfare with me nagging;
>
> To make, as wily lovers do,
>
> Thy after kindness more engaging.

Her child loses its glory of innocence in the course of time, in the process of maturity just as Wordsworth's child does.

Mary Robinson's *The Poor Singing Dame* is a gothic tale of crime and punishment with supernatural elements like Coleridge's *The Rime of Ancient Mariner*. The Lord of the castle is envious of the happy song of the dame and he threatens her to stop her singing. She dies in a miserable condition. After her death, the Lord is haunted and goes ghostly and dies! He has to repay the sin he has committed. The atmosphere is ghostly and evocative of terror.

**FORM**: Both, male and female poets of the Romantic era discarded heroic couplet and satire as form. They turned to forms like sonnet, ode, ballad, lyric and so on which were extensively practiced by Renaissance poets. Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson wrote sonnet sequences like Spenser and Shakespeare. Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* were so popular that it underwent ten subsequent editions. Robinson's

*Sopho and Phaeon* is a famous sonnet sequence. Ode seems to be another popular form with the Women poets of Romantic era. Mary Robinson and Letitia Elizabeth Landon wrote many odes like that of John Keats. Lyrics and narratives are commonly found in Felicia Brown Hemans, Joanna Baillie and Letitia Elizabeth Landon. Gothic is extensively practiced by Coleridge, Keats, so did Mary Robinson, Joanna Baillie and Felicia Hemans in poems like The *poor Singing Dame, The Shroud* and *Juana* respectively. Ballad is popular form in the Romantic poetry. Robinson's *The Proud Ladye* is a ballad like John Keats' *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* or Wordsworth's *Lucy Gray*. Mary Robinson published her collection of poetry in 1800 and like Wordsworth's it was called *Lyrical Tales*.

**IMAGERY**: Romantic women poets rely on imagery from the world of nature as their male counterparts did. For instance, Landon's *The Proud Ladye* has

> The rose of summer slept on her cheek,
>
> It's lily upon her breast,
>
> And her eyes shone forth like glorious star
>
> That rise the first in the west,

Which may be compared to Keats' imagery in *La Belle*...

> I see lily on thy brow,
>
> With anguished moist and fever dew;
>
> And on thy cheek a fading rose
>
> Fast withereth too.

Hemen's imagery in *Skylark* has similarity with Shelley's Skylark because it flies 'high above the morning cloud' just as Shelley's Skylark flies 'o'er which clouds are brightening'. Robinson's 'when the moon shone across the wide common, they hooted' in *The Poor Singing Dame* has striking similarity with Coleridge's 'As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted/ By woman wailing for her demon lover' in *Kubla Khan*. In both the poems, moon evokes gothic atmosphere. Joanna Baillie's imagery in *The Banished Man* merely echoes Wordsworth's imagery in *Tintern Abbey*. For 'Mountains blue', 'Well Known cliff', 'Wandering smoke' echo with 'Mountain springs', 'Lofty cliff', 'Wreaths of smoke' in *Tintern Abbey*. In both poems these images create mood of seclusion. Robinson's *The poor Singing Dame* and LEL's *The Proud Ladye* have medieval atmosphere like Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci, The Eve of ST Agnes* and Coleridge's *Christabel*. These poems have castles, knights etc that evoke the images of middle ages.

**DICTION**: Both the canonical male Romantic poets and women poets of the era discard the Neo-classical or Augustan diction with bombastic artificial word. They prefer simple colloquial language free from ornateness and artificiality. Sometimes they use archaic words.

**ORIENTAL ELEMENT**: Love of the Orient is another prominent feature of the Romantic poetry. Poems like *Kubla Khan* of Coleridge, *Lalla Rookh* of Thomas Moore and *Thalaba- The Destroyer* of Robert Southey are truly steeped in the spirit of orientalism. One finds the same in the poems of Letitia Elizabeth Landon' *The Nizam's Daughter, A Suttee, The Hindoo Girl's Song, The Kings of Golconda, The Ganges* and *The Rakee.*

In short, Women poets of the Romantic era:

1. Affirm the creative power of imagination like their male counterparts.
2. They introduce us to a new way of looking at nature, which becomes the mail subject of their work. They often argue that the possibility of transcendence or unity of being can be achieved through communion with nature. Their work exhibits a preference for nature in its sublime aspects; mountains, glaciers chasms, storms, as well as strange and exotic setting as the male Romantic poets did.
3. They tend to explain human society and its development in terms of an organic model borrowed from nature, and they reject materialist and mechanistic philosophies.
4. Women poets of the Romantic era write about the nature of individual self and the value of individual experience.

Thus, Women poets of the Romantic era exhibit the same characteristics that one finds in the poetry of male poets of the era. Therefore it is just to include these women poets in the Romantic canon.

**OBJECTIVES**:

The study aims at bringing out:

1] The need to change the conventional view of British Romantic Poetry.

2] This once again underlines the age old truth that periods of literary history are arbitrary and fragile.

3] In short, the study aims at bringing out the need for extending the Romantic canon.

4] It aims at interrogating the historicity and canonicity of British Romanticism.

**HYPOTHESIS**:

The Romantic canon doesn't exist up to the limits of five male poets viz Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats but it also covers the works of contemporary women poets like Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Felicia Brown Hemans, Joanna Baillie and Letitia Elizabeth Landon. The present study would like to present the hitherto neglected writings of women poets of Romantic era and make a case for their inclusion in the Romantic canon on more common thematic, imaginary, dictional, oriental and formal grounds. It would also contest the claims of historicity and canonicity of British Romanticism.

**LITERTURE SURVEY:**

The primary sources have been reinvented by the scholars of University of California. A new view is developed from this reinvention. It reinforces the plurality of Romanticism and emphasizes that not only five male poets comprise the romantic canon but also another view of reality comes from women poets of the age. Among secondary sources, seminal works on British Romanticism like Sir Murice Bowra's *The Romantic Imagination* do not talk or comments upon the women poets of the age. Another seminal works on British Romanticism, M. H. Abrams's *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism* and *Naturalism and Supernaturalism* do not refer to women poets of the era. It is not until late nineties that scholars and critics started to evaluate the works of women but most the works are still in cursory forms. As an instance I would like to discuss some books and articles and unpublished theses here. To begin with Jennifer Breen and Mary Nobles' *Romantic Literature* weighs contribution of Women poets like Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Jonna Baillie and others. They also stress the need for extending the romantic canon but their claims are more gender based.

Another work *Romanticism* by Nicholas Roe encompasses the works of women poets like Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson. His assessment is basically historic and social in nature. Stuart Curran's Cambridge *Companion to British Romanticism* assesses a comprehensive chronology and a fully up-to-date guide to further reading. For the past decade and more the Companion has been a much-admired and widely-used account of the phenomenon of British Romanticism that has inspired students to look at Romantic literature from a variety of critical angles and approaches. In this new incarnation, the volume continues to be a standard guide for students of Romantic literature and its contexts. There are many articles published in research journals about women poets of the era. To mention a few like *Letitia Landon and Romantic Hellenism* in Wordsworth Circle looks at the concept of Romantic Hellenism in the works of poet Letitia Landon. It differentiates Landon's Hellenism from the works of other poets like Mary Robinson and Lucy Aikin. It cites several literatures written by Landon and notes that her Hellenist poems self-destruct the poetic voices, and that she finds the idea of Greece as an appealing range of aesthetic and political values. It also asserts that Landon sought to destabilize the narrative of Hellenism in her own poetry. Another article *Romantic Histories: Charlotte Smith and "Beachy Head"* argues that Charlotte Smith's "Beachy Head" (1807) dramatizes a crucial impasse in Romantic historiography insofar as the poem rocks between two models of historical narrative: the large, supervisory project often characterized as the grand march of history, exemplified by Edward Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" (1776-88), and a narrative of locality, specificity, and individuals that includes the several kinds of human and natural history that Smith practices in her poem. This second model is roughly akin to the Annals project of modern French historiography. Smith's poem in this sense registers the formal and conceptual unease that Romantic historiography is unable to put aside, unease that G.W.F.

Hegel's philosophy of history and aesthetics challenges but does not put to rest. Considered in these terms, "*Beachy Head*" specifies the incommensurability of historical kinds to which Romanticism so often and so productively returns.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**:

The method that will be used in the present research would be minute textual analysis and the poems of these women poets will be examined primarily as literary artifacts and secondarily as gender or social documents. In short, the claim for their inclusion in the canon is going to be made purely on the basis of their excellence. Research methodology will include analysis, appreciation, interpretation, evaluation and description.

## **IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY**:

The present study would present hitherto neglected aspect of British Romanticism. Romanticism has been studied for ages but its canon comprises only five male poets. The canon is hardly stretched to include other poets like William Blake or Robert Burns. Also there were some women poets who represented another aspect of reality. This study makes a plea for the inclusion of such women poets of Romantic era like Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Felicia Brown Hemans, Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Jonna Baillie. They were not only contemporaries of poets like William Wordsworth and others but they were also more popular than the male poets. For example Wordsworth and Coleridge learnt the art of sonnet writing from Charlotte Smith, but no history of literature so far records this. Her *Elegiac Sonnets* were so popular that they went through nine expanding edition in the following sixteen years while Wordsworth's first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* has hardly consumed. Thus, through present study the concept of British Romanticism

will be considerably altered. The present study would interrogate the historicity and canonicity of British Romanticism.

**TENTATIVE SCHEME OF CHAPTERISATION:**

1) INTRODUCTION: This chapter will critically reexamine the British Romanticism as a literary concept and will reexamine its different characteristics as manifested in the contemporary poetry.

2) ROMANTICISM: PROMINENT LITERARY CANON: This chapter will discuss Romanticism as a prominent literary canon. It will study its manifestation in the contemporary poetry.

3) STUDY OF WOMEN POETS OF ROMANTIC ERA:

1 **Charlotte Smith**

1.1 Biographical Sketch

1.2 Formative influence on her

1.3 A Survey of her Works

1.4 Smith a Romantic Poet

1.5 Her Handling of Sonnet form

1.6 Melancholic Strain in her Work

**2 Mary Robinson**

2.1 Biographical Sketch

2.2 Formative Influences on her

2.3 A Survey of her Works

2.4 Robinson As a Romantic Poet

2.5 Her Handling of Ode form

2.6 Her supernaturalism

**3 Letitia Elizabeth Landon**

3.1 Biographical Sketch

3.2 Formative Influences on her

3.3 A Survey of her Works

3.4 LEL as a Romantic Poet

3.5 Her Orientalism

3.6 Her Supernaturalism

**4 Joanna Baillie**

4.1 Biographical Sketch

4.2 Formative Influences on her

4.3 A Survey of her Works

4.4 Baillie as a Romantic Poet

4.5 Her Treatment of Nature

**5 Felicia Brown Hemans**

5.1 Biographical Sketch

5.2 Formative Influences on her

5.3 A Survey of her Works

5.4 Mrs. Hemans as a Romantic Poet

5.5 Her Hebraism

5.6 Her Treatment of Nature

4) CONCLUSION: This chapter will sum up the need for extending the Romantic canon and inclusion of the women poets in it.

**CONCLUSION:**

Thus the study will make a case for the women poets of the Romantic Era and will prove that their poetry anticipates the same characteristics as that of male poets of the era. Hence, there is need of extending the Romantic canon by including these women poets of the era.

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